Designing On-Demand Learning Systems

Learning on-demand has proven to be a valuable management tool for providing competitive information, initiating on-the-job leadership training, streamlining business practices and improving sales performance. This paper introduces you to the steps necessary to ensure success in creating an on-demand learning program.

By "on-demand," we are defining a system in which employees have access to critical information and skills training on-line, whenever and wherever the employee may "demand" it.

An on-demand system can be as simple as a library of on-line .PDF files, or as sophisticated as an enterprise-wide learning management system. Whatever form it takes, the purpose of an on-demand system is to free employees from hours of meetings and classroom training. In exchange, employees can access knowledge whenever and wherever it is necessary.

Companies often make the mistake of starting an on-demand learning project by focusing on the electronic distribution of information. The distribution of information is actually the last step of a five-step planning process.

The five steps to building a successful learning on-demand program are:

1) Set measurable objectives
2) Develop and organize the content based on the objectives
3) Account for the culture and work habits of your organization
4) Blend the learning process with daily work
5) Evaluate the results

Let's review the five steps in detail:

First, set measurable objectives. To improve the performance of your employees, you must set measurable objectives. Ask yourself, "How will I know that the training has worked?" Don't settle for, "We'll know it when we see it." Clearly defined objectives should be written in detail and based on improvements in productivity, such as a quantifiable reduction in errors, a documented increase in sales or other measurable business objectives.

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Once you have set objectives, the second step is to design the curricula to meet your desired goals. You will need to determine what will contribute to meeting your objectives. A useful technique is to “reverse engineer” your objectives, starting with your goals, and asking “what is necessary for the learner to know or to do in order to reach this goal?” For instance, if you goal is to increase sales of a particular product, you might ask:

- “What do you need to know about the typical buyer’s needs or concerns?”
- “What features set our product apart from the competitions?”
- “What markets or businesses would likely need this product?”
- “How do you identify the decision maker when selling this product?”
- “What are competitors saying about their products and what is our position?”

Once you have determined what elements to include, you can develop appropriate content.

For some purposes, general off-the-shelf courses may be appropriate for your needs. There are many sources for content including universities, e-learning and training companies.

The quality of off-the-shelf programs varies widely and again, it is important to evaluate the content based on whether or not it will help you to meet your measurable objectives.

Instead of using off-the-shelf programs, companies often discover that their own companies have managers and specialists whose insight and experience is more appropriate. This is particularly true in areas such as launching business initiatives, discussing product sales strategies and establishing proprietary manufacturing processes. Unique products or processes often require unique or custom solutions.

The third step is to recognize the uniqueness of your company. The attitudes, beliefs and managerial styles that permeate your company are an important consideration in designing an on-demand program. Equally important is making sure that your message is consistent with the everyday working experiences of the audience.

Here are some tips:

First, Get buy-in from influential managers when developing the program. Be sure to take the time to explain the advantages of the program to management and ask for their participation in promoting the program.

Second, survey your audience of employees for suggestions, advice and preferences in designing the program. Report the results of the survey and create an “idea center” to encourage and support participation as the program develops.

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Third, blend learning into the work environment. Research supports the fact that students learn best through a combination of study and practical application. The learner needs to acquire new information and then have a safe means of interpreting the information. In addition to this practice, your students also need real-world experience in which to apply the new information and ideas—in other words," practice.'

The educational process that encompasses all three learning styles – memorization, practical application and practice -- is often called "blended learning."

Blended learning first incorporates on-line learning for conveying facts and concepts. On-line learning is often followed by a workshop or classroom environment to "try-on" the new learning without affecting job performance. Workshop practice is followed by carefully mentored on-the-job performance to provide advice and coaching as the learner masters the new skills.

Notice that on-demand learning does not eliminate the need for classroom experience, but it greatly reduces the amount of classroom time needed. The learning of facts now takes place on-demand prior to the workshop or classroom experience. The classroom time is now used to provide a safe and supportive space in which to incorporate these new learned facts. Classroom time is further reduced by practicing these new skills on-the-job, under the watchful support of a skilled mentor.

Practical skills, such as how to operate a machine, require a relatively short blended learning cycle; a day or a few days is often sufficient. Conversely, learning managerial skills may involve a process that takes place over the greater part of a year and may include reading, hearing perspectives from management, the use of interactive courseware, role-playing in the classroom, on-the-job practice with specific responsibilities, mentoring and coaching to make sure the new knowledge is properly applied.

The length and composition of the blended course will differ, based on the course objectives. Different objectives will require varying amounts of the three methodologies.

We've now discussed setting the objectives, developing the content, accounting for the culture of your organization and integrating learning into the work environment. The last consideration is distribution.

The value of on-demand learning is that you can adapt to the needs of the learner and deliver information whenever the learner needs it. It does not rely on the often arbitrary scheduling of classroom courses.

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There is an entire industry of applications and distribution services providers available to deliver learning on demand. When you are first getting started, it not necessary for you to choose a "final" distribution system. It is more important to focus on the learning outcomes that you wish to produce and then develop a workflow and decision process to achieve that outcome. As you roll out your first program, you can begin to consider:

- How many programs will you be offering in a year?
- How many employees will be enrolled?
- Where will they be located?
- Will you need a system to provide scheduling and registration?
- Will you need on-line testing?
- Will you need to certify the learner?
- Will you need to track the learner's progress?
- Would you like your programs to include video to see the expert or to watch an assembly process?
- Will there be white papers or manuals to be downloaded?
- Will the courses need to be secure?
- Will the programs run inside or outside your company firewall?

Some requirements are "must-haves" and some are "nice-to-haves." As you start to see what works and what doesn't, you must be cautious to choose technologies that will not become obsolete as your continual learning program develops.

Lastly, as you roll out the first program, keep track of your results. Survey the participants for constructive suggestions for improvements and their reactions to the course. Above all, be careful to evaluate the course against your original measurable objectives. Use this feedback to continually improve the programs that follow.

On demand-learning is the new frontier for employee education. These fundamentals will help to create measurable results for your company and get you off on the right foot to designing successful learning on-demand programs.

This is one of a series of summaries on media offered by Barry O'Brien. Barry O'Brien is President of North Shore Communications Group, Inc., a full-service communications company specializing in PodCasting, e-Learning, training, video production and streaming, and on-line media services. For more information, contact Barry O'Brien at (978) 282-8222 or bobrien@northshorecommunications.com

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